



U.S. Department of Health & Human Services

## Administration for Children & Families

### Faith-based Marriage Promotion and Education

#### Overview

Marriage promotion and education initiatives are comprised of a wide variety of programs, classes, materials, and counseling services that are based on the idea that couples can learn how to have successful marriages, thereby improving their well-being and that of their families. They encompass marriage preparation, counseling for married couples, or crisis intervention. A unifying theme in faith-based programs is the incorporation of tenets of religious faith into their operating principles regarding issues of marriage and family life. A program or curriculum may be designed for couples of a specific religious faith or denomination or may be more generally based (e.g., marriage and family life within the Judeo-Christian ethic). Often, faith-based programs enlist assistance from members of a congregation or community to meet their objectives.

Generally, the programs and services aim to teach practical skills that can assist couples to communicate more effectively, to prepare for marriage, or to work together to improve their family's ability to function productively. Programs may be tailored by individual trainers and counselors for particular audiences, such as families with step-children or mixed-faith marriages. Approaches typically include discussions of topics such as finances, parenting issues, conflict resolution, anger management, and sexual relations. Services are delivered through a variety of arrangements, including classroom sessions, weekend retreats, publications, and community activities. The examples below illustrate the diversity of approaches among faith-based marriage promotion and education programs and organizations.

#### Programs

***Marriage Savers.*** Marriage Savers is a nationwide ministry that works through religious congregations to help couples prepare for and strengthen their marriages. Its principal strategy is to establish a community-wide marriage policy in which ministers, priests, and rabbis work together and devote resources to strengthen marriages and decrease the community's divorce rate. With the help of participating clergy, Marriage Saver trainers recruit mentoring couples to help engaged couples prepare for marriage or to help married couples strengthen their existing commitment. Trained mentoring couples also provide ongoing guidance and support to couples facing marital problems. Marriage Savers encourages clergy to require at least four months of marriage preparation, including a premarital inventory. The program also recommends clergy-led weekend retreats for married couples who are seeking to improve their relationship skills. For more information about the program, visit the website at <http://www.marriagesavers.com>.

***Catholic Engaged Encounter.*** Catholic Engaged Encounter, a marriage preparation program delivered during weekend retreats, is designed to give engaged couples an opportunity to talk privately about their goals, family finances, sex, children, and their role in the church and society. A team of two couples and a Catholic priest leads the retreat and encourages the engaged couples to examine their own relationships. The format includes questions for individuals to answer privately and time for couples to discuss their thoughts with each other. Although initiated as a Catholic program, it is open to all Christian faiths and is available nationwide and internationally. For additional information, visit the website at <http://www.engagecounter.com>.

**PAIRS.** PAIRS is a program designed to teach couples practical "how-to" skills to help them sustain committed and loving marriages. Historically PAIRS has been taught by licensed mental health professionals or ordained clergy. Program options range from a one-day workshop to a 16-week mastery course and may be focused on issues ranging from premarital preparation to the problems of deeply troubled marriages. The curriculum can be adapted to the ideas and cultures of different faiths and has been used by Jewish, Baptist, Church of Christ, Methodist, Lutheran, Catholic, and Presbyterian clergy. Clergy members of all of these faiths volunteer as resource counselors to explain how they have used PAIRS in their church or synagogue. Their contact information is available at the PAIRS website. For additional information, visit the website at <http://www.pairs.com>.

**PREP.** Like PAIRS, PREP was designed to teach communication skills and conflict-resolution in a secular format but also has Christian and Jewish versions available. For additional information, visit the website at <http://www.prepinc.com>.

**Reconciling God's Way.** Reconciling God's Way is a Christian curriculum used by clergy and religious lay leaders to provide services to married couples who want to strengthen their own marriages or who want to learn ways to help others whose marriages are in crisis. A leader's kit contains training materials to teach counselors how to work directly with married couples as well as how to recruit mentor couples to work as "support partners" with participating couples. For additional information, visit the website at <http://www.bvg.org/reconcilers>.

**The Third Option.** Originally designed to provide an alternative to enduring or ending a troubled marriage, the Third Option can also be used for premarital preparation and marriage enrichment. Developed in Judeo-Christian tradition, this program is non-denominational and typically offered for free through Catholic Charities. Program is unique in its on-going support of couples. Manual-driven; no training in the curriculum is necessary. For additional information, visit the website at <http://www.thethirdoption.com/>.

**Caring Couples Network.** Caring Couples Network is an ecumenical ministry initiated by the United Methodist Church to develop a model for married couples, clergy, and professional counselors in religious congregations to provide services to couples and families experiencing difficulties. The counseling teams arrange for mentoring, enrichment events, and other resources for engaged couples, married parents, and couples and families in distress. Packaged materials explain how to start a local network started, enlist and train candidates to be mentoring couples, identify couples in need, and find ways to link the local network with a larger community. For additional information, please visit the website at <http://www.discipleshipresources.org>.

**Retrouvaille.** For married couples experiencing serious problems in their marriage, Retrouvaille offers weekend retreats led by a priest and mentor couples. Though a Catholic program, couples from other religious faiths are welcomed. For more information, please visit the website at: <http://www.retrouvaille.org/index.html>.

**Additional Information:** For more information, or to request technical assistance, visit the ACF website at <http://www.acf.hhs.gov/key.html>. Or contact Bill Coffin, Special Assistant for Marriage Education, at [bcoffin@acf.hhs.gov](mailto:bcoffin@acf.hhs.gov) or (202) 260-1550.

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*Resources mentioned here are not all inclusive. Their mention should not be construed as implying, in any way, that the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services or its Administration for Children and Families endorses or favors any organization, company, institution, person, activities, products or services.*